



How do we make sense of the places we live in or travel through? How do our personal narratives draw from and reflect upon the world around us? How can we trace and inscribe histories across the land? *Setting: land* engages these questions through four video-based artworks by Kevin Lee Burton, Kaoru Ryan Klatt, Kade Twist, and Anna Tsouhlarakis. Each takes land as both a setting and a source of narratives of people and place. The interactions between these artworks reflect and bring to light the often contradictory visions of culture and nature that compose various ideas about landscape and the land. Through the vehicle of moving images these artists navigate competing views which, over time, have come to form our present understanding of the North American landscape.

Through their artworks these artists enunciate their own visions of the land, confirming the specificity of each gesture as they arise from diverse locations of geography and perspective. Art historian W.J.T. Mitchell defines the transition of land into landscape as “the process by which social and subjective identities are formed,” arguing that the construction of landscapes is a “cultural practice.”<sup>1</sup> In this view, what might at first glance appear as a seemingly innocuous and immediate representation of land can be read as an ideologically transformed version of that location; a landscape arising from *viewing* the land from a particular perspective.

This exhibition draws, in part, on the idea of landscape as a historical genre or mode of representation used to depict various natural environments that are invariably influenced by the dominant views of a particular time and place. Within the context of the land-base of North America, the idea of a landscape often carries within it a distinct way of viewing the land as representative of nature and imagines nature as a phenomenon separate from culture. For example, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Hudson River School of painters in the United States were known for depicting vast terrains full of acquisitive promise—but often apparently void of any substantial settlement—these artists are nevertheless inextricably linked to histories of early settlement, colonization, and

<sup>1</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, “Introduction,” in *Landscape and Power*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

expansionism. As such, their depictions of nature can also be read against the grain of their stated intentions to expose particular ideological or cultural influences manifest throughout their depictions of the “natural” landscape.

Within each of the works in *Setting: land*, there exists a tension between culturally inflected meanings of land and landscape and direct perceptual engagement with the natural world. This is also a tension between the ways in which encounters with the landscape shape culture and, at the same time, how culture is used to frame and represent our understanding of the land. These narratives play out through each of the artists’ commentaries on the relationships between people and land or landscape. Their ideas are drawn from specific forms of cultural knowledge, whether originating from colonial experiences, frontier mythologies, or Indigenous experiences with the natural world.

In addition, the works in *Setting: land* have been brought together for presentation through the common languages of film and video. Playing off of the theatrical convention of ‘setting’ a scene, this exhibition considers the significance of the different processes these artists utilize when working with new media and moving images. For instance, Burton’s contribution to the exhibition, *Nikamowin (Song)* (2008), is inflected by his background as a filmmaker, which is evident in his directorial and editing processes. As an artist trained in video, Klatt produces feature-length and documentary films such as *Yulaska* (2007), which he has then transformed for this gallery exhibition into a multi-media installation (2012). Multi-disciplinary artist Tsouhlarakis often uses video as a medium to develop temporal narratives that document performances, as in her contribution here, *Navigation* (2002). Twist’s video compositions, such as *Our Land Your Imagination: The Judeo-Christian Western Scientific Worldview and Phoenix* (2008), engage found video from the Internet with the gallery setting, enveloping and occupying space through projection. In this way these artists’ works stand apart from—while still drawing on—precedents in film; a medium which has, in North America especially, a long history of

charting the ways that people interact with each other across the shifting terrains of land, nature and culture.

Kade Twist’s *Our Land Your Imagination: The Judeo-Christian Western Scientific Worldview and Phoenix* is a two channel video installation juxtaposing scenes from different locations around Phoenix, Arizona. As an installation the two channels are projected in large scale format so that they face each other at a right-angle on the walls in one corner of the gallery. Utilizing and manipulating video sourced from YouTube, Twist illustrates a sort of ‘community portrait’ drawn together through a collage of moving images from suburban Phoenix. In the context of the city he presently lives in, Twist questions the interactions of dominant systems of value determined by an aggregate of cultural experiences within the urban landscape.

Through the now ubiquitous video-sharing website YouTube, individuals who have access to the Internet can share videos on any subject with a world-wide audience. This mode of representation and communication has recently become a significant indicator of the present moment, to the point where videos that have gone ‘viral’ now speak to the interests of mass audiences and each user has their chance at their Warholian “fifteen minutes of fame.” As a result, the sheer surplus of videos now available online form a type of archive indicating the ideas and beliefs of users from a series of particular cultural moments and contexts.

In *Our Land Your Imagination*, Twist has spliced together the pilfered videos from YouTube, choreographing specific moments onto two separate but synched channels. As a result the work becomes a portrait of a city rendered by the selective suturing of videos that depict specific types of action or events. Each channel projects a themed selection. One projects five sequences of women singing songs by The Carpenters: “Close To You,” “We’ve Only Just Begun,” “I Need to Be In Love,” “I Won’t Last A Day Without You,” and “Yesterday Once More.” The other shows a sequence of five representations of the suburban landscape replete with empty houses and strange events.<sup>2</sup> By comparison with some

<sup>2</sup> This work was made in 2008, the same year that many Phoenix homeowners, hit hard by the economic recession, were forced into foreclosure at an astounding rate.